

On the Insolence of the Jews to Louis the Pious (826/827) Agobard of Lyon

Translated by W.L. North from *Agobardi Lugdunensis Opera Omnia, Opusculum XI*, ed. L. Van Acker, Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis 52, Turnholt: Brepols 1981, pp. 191-95.

Introduction

Written in 826/27 directly to Emperor Louis the Pious, Agobard's treatise "*On the insolence of the Jews*" is in large measure an exposé of what he perceived to be the arrogant and fundamentally impious actions of the imperial *missi* and Evrard, master of the Jews, towards the Christian community of Lyon and their un-Christian support and encouragement of the Jewish population in Lyon. In other words, it is a letter of protest against a Jewish policy under Louis that was fundamentally favorable to this religious minority. To argue against such a policy, Agobard claims to make known the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the Jews were working against the Christian community, whether it was in selling Christians into slavery, cursing Christians and Christ (i.e. blasphemy), or forcing their domestic servants to adhere to the rhythms of Jewish life. His solution to many of these problems was an enforced stricter segregation of members of the two faiths from one another in all aspects of life.

As with Agobard's other responses to the status and power of the Jews in Lyon, this work reveals a Jewish community that was not only fully integrated into the lives of members of the Christian community but also one that could claim a considerable amount of cultural and political prestige, a prestige that Agobard feared would make Judaism seem attractive in the eyes of his Christian congregation.

Text

To his most Christian, truly pious, and always august emperor Louis, the most fortunate triumphal victor in Christ, Agobard, the most downcast of all your servants.

When omnipotent God – Who knew before time itself and foreordained that you would be a pious rector in these truly demanding times – raised your prudence and zealous religion over the other mortals of your time, there is no doubt but that you were prepared as a remedy for the dangerous times about which the Apostle speaks: *In the last days the dangerous times shall begin, and there shall be men who love themselves, greedy, puffed up, etc.*[II Timothy 3:1-2] *and who, although they have the appearance of piety,*

nullify its strength.[II Timothy 3:5] From times such as these nothing more should be expected than what is already seen, except for the release of Satan and the public trampling of the holy City for the forty-two months, which shall occur through the head of all the iniquitous, Antichrist.[cf. Apocalypse 11:2]

Therefore since this is the way things are, I beseech your most tranquil long-sufferingness that you lend your most patient ear to the words with which I, the least of your servants, consider it most necessary to admonish your most holy solicitude concerning such a vital matter, a matter which is either uniquely or especially one to which your governance more than all others should bring aid.

If I could pursue my account of the matter while passing over in silence the names of the responsible parties, I would gladly do so. But because it cannot be done, I commit myself to your goodness and patience as I surrender myself to the dangers and inform you of what is ruinous to pass over in silence. There came Gerric and Frederick who were preceded by Evrard,¹ your agents (*missi*) in fact yet not doing your will completely but rather acting on behalf of another. They showed themselves to be terrible to the Christians and mild to the Jews, especially in Lyon, where they set up a persecuting faction (*pars persecutionis*) against the Church and they goaded the church to many groans, sighs, and tears.

Because this persecution was directly principally against me, I should not recount the whole, unless perchance your most clement concern should wish to know. But if your kindness allows, I shall begin to intimate it briefly, insofar as it was injurious to the Church of Christ.

When the Jews first arrived, they gave me a message in your name and another one to the man who rules the district of Lyon in place of the count; [this message] ordered him to offer aid to the Jews against me. We absolutely did not believe that such messages as these issued from your judgment, although they were read out in your sacred name and sealed with your ring. The Jews began to rage with a certain odious insolence, threatening that we would be afflicted with every sort of injury by the agents whom they had obtained to take vengeance upon Christians. After them, Evrard arrived and repeated the same thing and said that your majesty was truly angry with me because of the Jews. Then the aforementioned agents arrived, holding in their hands a tax code(?) (*stipendialis tractoria*) and a capitulary of sanctions which we do not

¹ Evrard held the office of *magister Iudeorum* under Louis the Pious. It is not known whether he himself was a Jew. On this office, see B. Bachrach, *Early Medieval Jewish Policy in Western Europe*, Minneapolis, MN 1977, 99-101.

believe exists by your command.

For these reasons, the Jews were made joyful beyond measure and the Christians saddened – and not only those who fled or hid or were detained, but the rest as well who saw or heard. In particular, it was because the Jews' opinion received such confirmation that they irreverently began to preach to the Christians what they ought to believe and hold, openly blaspheming the Lord God and our Savior Jesus Christ. This perversity was strengthened by the words of your agents who whispered in the ears of certain people that the Jews are not abominable, as many think, but are held dear in your eyes and because some of their people were saying that they are considered better than Christians.

I, your unworthy servant, was not in fact in Lyon [at the time] but was far away on the case of the monks of Nantuadensium, who were fighting among themselves because of a certain rivalry. Nonetheless I sent our agents with a short letter to those men [saying] that they should command whatever they wanted and we would obey what they had enjoined. But we received no indulgence from them. Consequently, certain of our priests whom they threatened by name, did not dare to show their faces.

We suffered these things from the Jews' supporters and for no other reason but that we preached to Christians that they should not sell Christian slaves to them; that they should not allow these Jews to sell Christians to Spain nor to possess them as paid domestics lest Christian women celebrate the Sabbath with them, work on Sundays, eat with them during Lent, and their paid servants eat meat on these days; and that no Christian should buy meats sacrificed and butchered by Jews and sell them to other Christians; and that they should not drink their wine or other things like this.

For it is the practice of the Jews that when they slaughter an animal to eat and kill it using three cuts so that it is not strangled, if the liver appears to be damaged when the entrails are opened, or if a lung clings to the side or breath inflates it, or bile is not found, and other things like this, the meat is considered to be unclean by the Jews and sold to the Christians and these meats are called by the insulting expression "Christian beasts" (*christiana pecora*). With regard to the blood which the Jews both consider to be unclean and do not use except to sell it to Christians, if it should happen to flow into the earth anywhere, even into a filthy place, they swiftly draw it out of the ground and put it in a vessel to preserve. And as for how they do other things worthy of reproach concerning the blood, there are not only many Christian witnesses but also many Jews.

That the Jews daily curse Jesus Christ and the Christians in all their prayers

under the name "Nazarenes" not only the blessed Jerome attests, who writes that he knew them intimately and was inside their skin,² but many of the Jews also bear witness to this. On this matter, for the sake of example, I spoke to the Christians in this way: *If there is a man who is faithful and a lover of his elder and lord and he senses that someone is his lord's enemy, detractor, reviler, and a threat to him, he does not wish to be this man's friend, table companion, or sharer in his food. But if he should be [this man's friend, etc.] and his elder and lord learns this, [the lord] would judge that the man was not faithful to him. And therefore, since we know that the Jews are blasphemers and men who curse, so to speak, the Lord God Christ and his Christians, we should not be joined to them through the sharing of food or drink in accordance with the rule (modus) that was given long ago and commanded by the holy fathers in their words and examples. For the rest, because they live among us and we should not be wicked to them nor act contrary to their life, health, or wealth, let us observe the rule (modus) that has been ordained by the Church. The way in which we should be cautious or human towards them, is not at all obscure but has been clearly expounded.*

Most pious lord, I have mentioned only a few out of the many things concerning the faithlessness of the Jews, our admonition, and the wounding of Christianity that is occurring through the supporters of the Jews, since I do not know whether [this news] can even come to your attention. Nonetheless, it is absolutely necessary that your pious solicitude know how the Christian faith is being harmed by the Jews in certain ways. For when they lie to simple Christians and boast that they are dear to you because of the patriarchs; that they enter and leave your sight with honor; that most excellent people desire their prayers and blessings and confess that they wished they had the same author of the law as the Jews; when they say that your counselors are aroused against us for their sake, because we forbid Christians from drinking their wine; when, in trying to claim this, they boast that they have received from Christians many, many pounds of silver from the sale of wine and cannot find out, after running through the canons, why Christians should abstain from their food and drink; when they produce commands signed with golden seals in your name and containing words which, in our opinion, are not true; when they show people women's clothes as if they were sent to their wives by your kinsmen or matrons of the palaces; when they expound upon the glory of their forefathers; when they are permitted, contrary to the law, to build new synagogues – [when all this occurs] it even reaches the point when naive Christians say that the Jews preach to them better than our priests. And this was particularly true when the aforementioned agents ordered that the markets that usually occur on Saturdays should be moved lest [the Jews'] Sabbatism be impeded, and they let [the Jews] choose on which days they had to go to market from then on, claiming that this suited the utility of the Christians because of the Sunday vacation. In the end, it proved to be more

² Jerome, *In Amos* I.1.12; Jerome, *Epistula* 129. 4.

useless to the Jews since those who are near, because they buy the necessary food on Saturday, spend Sunday more freely at the celebration of the Mass and at preaching, and those who come from a distance on the occasion of the market, attend the evening and morning offices after the celebration of the Mass has been performed and return home with edification.

Now then, if it should please your most benign kindness to listen, let us say what the Churches of the Gauls and their rectors, kings as well as bishops, should hold to regarding the separation of the two religions, namely that of the Church and that of the Jews, and what they should pass down in writing and leave to posterity to be maintained, and how it is consonant with authority, that is the Acts of the Apostles and takes its origin from the Old Testament. From these it is shown how detestable enemies of the truth should be considered and how they are worse than all unbelievers, as divine Scripture teaches, and what unworthy things they think about God and heavenly matters. We have discussed all of these things with our brethren and have sent [these writings] to be presented to your most expansive excellence.

After the preceding note had been dictated, a certain man from Cordoba arrived, fleeing from Spain. He said that he had been stolen as a little boy by a certain Jew of Lyon 24 years before and sold, and that he had fled this year with another boy from Arles who had been likewise stolen by a Jew six years earlier. When we sought out those known to the man who was from Lyon and found them, some said that others had been stolen by this same Jew, others bought and sold, and that this year another boy was stolen and sold by a Jew. At that moment it was discovered that many Christians are sold by Christians and bought by Jews and that many unspeakable things are perpetrated by them which are too foul to write.